AUSTRALIAN SUBMARINER P.O.W.'S AFTER THE GALLIPOLI LANDING

by M. W. D. White

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The Dardanelles campaign started as a plan for the British and French battle fleets to penetrate into the Sea of Marmora and confront the Turks at their capital city, Constantinople, and coerce them into staying neutral in the war with Germany, or even joining the allies.

The difficulty was that the Narrows were cleverly mined so that the battle ships could not operate in the close waters to blast the forts with their huge guns. When the minesweepers went in to clear the mines the forts and Turkish Army artillery kept up such a fire that they had to withdraw. Because the mines resulted in the British *Irresistible* being sunk, the *Ocean* abandoned, and the *Inflexible* being heavily damaged and the French *Bouvet* also being sunk (with a loss of 600 men) the surface naval attack ended. After that it was up to the submarines. The E15 was lost on 17 April 1915 in making an attempt. The next attempt was by the Australian submarine AE2. (Details of this exciting and courageous penetration were set out by the author in a paper to the Society in Brisbane on . . . . . .)[1]

The AE2 penetrated the narrows of the Dardanelles on Anzac Day at the same time as the landings were taking place on the other side of the Gallipoli Peninsula. In the course of the penetration she escaped the hazards of mines, strong currents, being twice partially carried up on the shore near the forts, sank a gunboat and finally, with batteries, air and men exhausted, safely entered the Sea of Marmora.

The AE2 operated in the Sea of Marmora for 5 days in all before being sunk. On the fourth day she met up with the British submarine E14 (Lt. Cdr. Boyle); which had set off upon her receipt of the wireless message from AE2 that it had got through successfully. They arranged to meet at 10 a.m. the next day, 30 April 1915. At the rendezvous place on that day AE2 suddenly lost depth control and was unsuccessful in the attempt to regain it. When part of the submarine came above the surface the Turkish gunboat, Sultan Hissar, holed the pressure hull in 3 places with gunfire making further diving impossible. The sinking of the AE2 was hastened by her captain, Lt.Cdr. Stoker,

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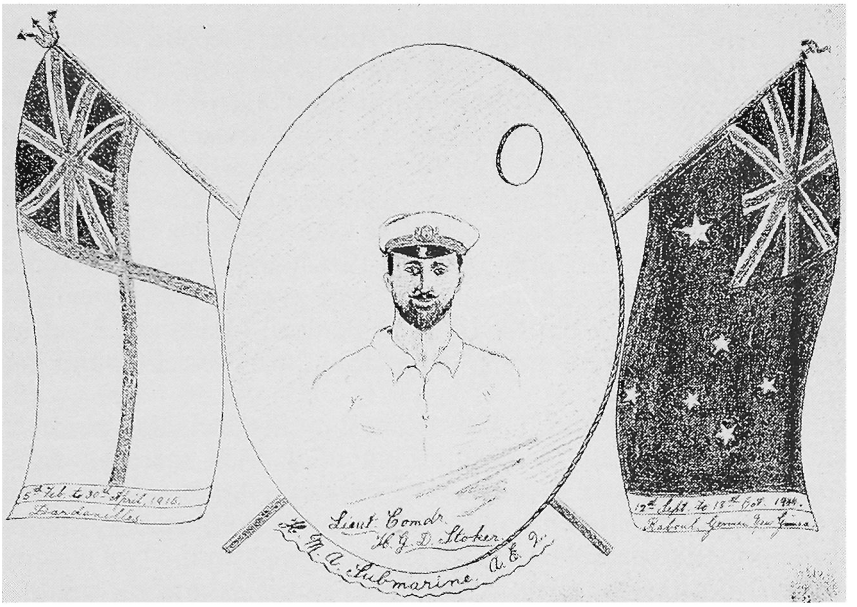
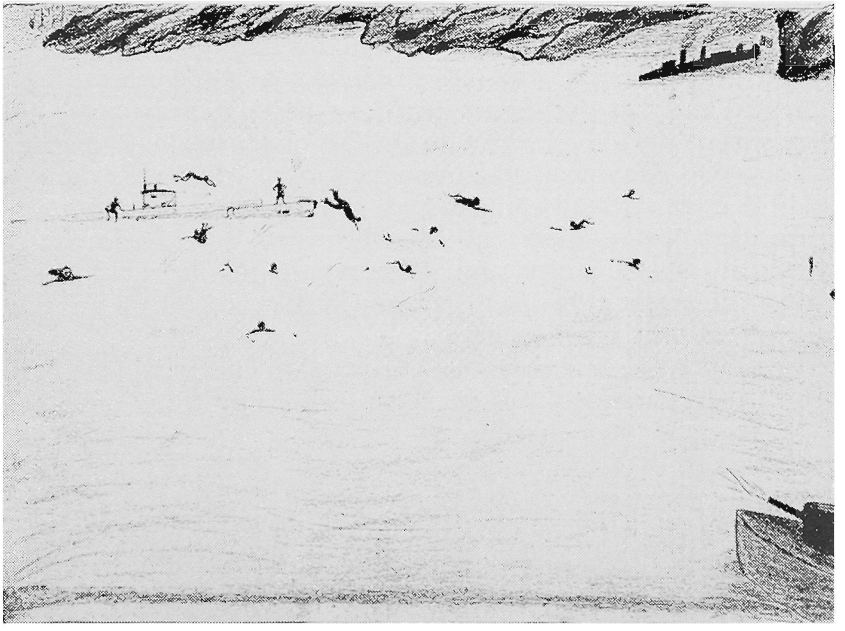


Two sketches by leading Signalman Thomson. Above: Lieutenant-Commander H.G.D. Stoker and Below: a graphic sketch of men abandoning the submarine under fire.



scuttling her while the crew all clambered out of the submarine. As she sank some of them had to swim for it and some were taken into boats but all of the 3 officers and 29 men were successfully taken on board the gunboat.

The only bright spot in the loss of Australia's second submarine, the AE2, on 30 April, 1915, was that no lives were lost. On the count of heads on board the Turkish torpedo-boat which had shelled and then rescued them it was ascertained that the 3 officers and 29 ratings had all been safely rescued. The Sultan Hissar was crewed mainly by Turks but included on board were one German Officer and three German sailors. The submariners were allowed to dry their clothes and were then bundled into the forecastle while the vessel proceeded to Gallipoli and berthed alongside a hospital ship. There they were fallen in and inspected by the German General, Limen von Sanders, and his staff;[2] before being transferred to a vessel bound for Constantinople.

They were ordered into Turkish soldiers' outfits, including greatcoat and fez, and, in the early morning of 1 May marched from Constantinople wharf to the military barracks. Apart from a crowd at the wharf no particular notice was taken and no hostility shown by the populace on their march, although their capture had already been broadcast on the radio. According to Stoker some of the children were a little disconcerting, however, in drawing their fingers across their throats with unmistakable significance.[3] At the barracks the officers were separated from the crew and were thereafter kept separate. Stoker and the officers were initially treated well, in the way of food, a bath etc. while the Turkish commandant and other officers attempted to learn details of the AE2's passage, armament, and operations. When they obtained no satisfaction the treatment changed and they were placed in a small unsanitary room. Meanwhile the crew had been given similar treatment and, in a somewhat desultory way, interrogated. None of them were violently treated. Enver Pasha himself came to interrogate Stoker, and Stoker reports that he subsequently left in an ill temper at failing to gain any intelligence. Stoker was then placed in solitary confinement.

By this time the AE2 crew were beginning to understand the basic problems which were to confront them for the next three-and-a half years — lack of food, clothing and bedding, abundant vermin, and the peasant ignorance of many of their guards. Much of the hardship which they were forced to endure arose from the different standard of living and very different diet of the Turks. On many occasions their hardship arose from the fact that the treatment meted to them was similar to that meted by the Turks to their own soldiers. The corruption and brutality meted by some Turk and German captors in certain camps arose from the personalities of the persons involved and was not attributable to a general policy.

On 8 May officers and men were moved from Constantinople across the Bosphorus to Scutari, and on by train to Afyon Kara Hissar. There they were herded into huts for two days and suffered considerable hardship from the cold. But their complaints may have been heeded because they were finally moved to other accommodation, and here they met some French sailors from the Saphire, and some of the crew from the E15. On 15 May, they were joined by two Australian soldiers captured in the fighting on the peninsula.[4] Afyon Kara Hissar was the general holding post for all the POWs in Turkey at the time. One of the Turkish officers who was particularly hard was a Lieutenant Commander, saved from the Turkish battleship Messedieh, torpedoed by the B11 on 13 December 1914. The B11 was commanded by Lt. Holbrook, who was awarded a V.C. for the action. Holbrook later had a town named after him in New South Wales. It was previously named Germantown and its citizens, wishing to change the name after the outbreak of war, read of the exploits of Lt. Norman Douglas Holbrook and so re-named their town. It is situated on the Hume Highway some 327 miles south of Sydney and a model of the B11 is on display there together with a plaque setting out its exploits. Holbrook visited the town twice at its request.[5]

On 1 June 1915 the AE2 crew, along with other POWs, were sent out to work on the roads. They were paid some pittance for this and were in dire need of it as their rations were inadequate and the only money coming in was a small amount Stoker had managed to send to them. In July they were sent away from the barracks to work on roads further out in the country.[6] On return to Afyon Kara Hissar they were joined by certain new prisoners, whose train was shelled by E11 on the journey, and it was welcome news to the submariners to know that their fellow submarines were vigorously prosecuting the war. An enquiry into conditions in the barracks also resulted in an improvement in conditions at that time. The reason was soon evident because on 8 August Mr Phillips, the American Ambassador in Constantinople, arrived at the town to see the prisoners. It was probably the result of his interest and efforts that conditions for the POWs were not far worse. The American and the Dutch Ambassadors, and the Red Cross, were of particular value to the POWs.[7] Although the letters were irregular, and the parcels seldom got through at all, it was probably because of their efforts that anything at all arrived. The obstacles were those officially placed by Turkish authorities, such as censorship, and also those due to the inherent inefficiency of the Turkish system together with those due to the corruption and dishonesty of certain Turkish officers. At least one POW was to see on sale in the local town an object which he knew could only have been sent from Australia for him.[8] The result was that items were received intermittently. However, thanks once again to diplomatic

British and French prisoners of war working for the Turkish Government at Afyon Kara Hissar, 1915. Drawing by Leading Signalman Thomson.

intervention, the money allowances came fairly regular after initial delay. This money was essential to buy enough food to live, even at the inflated rates at which certain camp commandants made the food available, thereby making illegal profits.

From time to time their numbers were augmented by other allied servicemen who had been taken prisoner. Among them were the Australian sailors Leading Stoker John Kerin O.N. 7391[9] from New South Wales and Able Seaman E. A. Gwynne O.N. 7475, both of whom had been available as spare crew for AE2 but did not sail in her. They did sail in E7 but she became entangled in the nets in the Narrows and was lost on 4 September 1915.[10]

Occasionally the officers were able to send money and messages to the crew, and on 14 September 1915 (the anniversary of the loss of AE1) Stoker was able to speak with them.[11] On 2 October Stoker and Lt. Fitzgerald, an officer from E15, were sent to Constantinople (Istanbul) for special imprisonment as a reprisal by Enver Pasha for alleged maltreatment of the Turkish POWs in Egypt. After 32 days imprisonment of which 25 were in solitary confinement in a dark, wet, dungeon, their lives were undoubtedly saved by proof that there was no such maltreatment of Turks and by the active intervention of the American Ambassador, Mr Henry Morganthau,[12] through an interview with Enver Pasha. On release the two emaciated men were given five full days in a luxury hotel in Constantinople, before being returned to the POW camp at Afyon Kara Hissar. Thanks to intervention by the American Ambassador, and the Apostolic Delegate, Lt. Fitzgerald was repatriated on a parole to England in January, 1916, as an apology for the reprisal. Stoker was not. The different treatment possibly arose because Lt. Fitzgerald was of the Roman Catholic faith and Vatican pressure was successfully brought to bear on his behalf.

Stoker and two other officers escaped from Afyon Kara Hissar on 23 March 1916. They covered most of the rugged 130 miles to the Mediterranean coast where, starving and exhausted, they sought shelter from a shepherd. This they got, but the shepherd's report of the incident led to their capture. Imprisonment followed for months and a slow, dilatory court martial. They feared for their lives; but the sentence was 25 days imprisonment for Stoker, and 20 days each for the other two. After so long in prison the sentence was absurd. They burst into laughter, in which the officers of the court joined,[13] apparently knowing full well the effect of their decision. Pursuing his duty to try to escape the indefatigable Stoker organised a further attempt after receipt of secret maps section by section in a series of postcards from an officer who had already escaped to freedom. But this escape attempt also failed

The conditions in the AE2 sailors' camps were harsher than those of the officers; probably because of the requirement that they work.

Life was a struggle against starvation and malnutrition, against typhus and malaria, and especially against their greatest irritant — vermin.[14] Initially they were all mixed with other prisoners, i.e. submariners from E15, E7 (including the Australian Leading Stoker A. Wilson),[15] E20, Saphir, Turquoise; and Army and Air Force personnel. Later they were split up and some went to different work camps. Despite the extremes of weather and debilitating conditions some escapes were made. The two AE2 Able Bodied Seamen, torpedo-men, Wheat and Nichols, managed an escape for 19 days from Belemedik Pouzanti (a small town probably in the central west) but they were forced by starvation and sickness to give themselves up. Wheat managed a second escape with Stoker J. Cullen (AE2) and Private S. Samson, (A.I.F.).[16] Again starvation, continuous rain and sickness drove them to return, and this time Wheat's life was only saved from his treatment in solitary confinement by the intervention of Captain Clifford, a medical officer of the Indian Medical Service. During the internment generally some pressure was brought to bear for the alleviation of hardship for the sailors who were of the Roman Catholic faith, through the Apostolic Delegate in Constantinople. Probably because of it, a party of AE2 men, including Able Seamen Nichols and Churcher and Stoker Wishart, were transferred to work at St. Stefano (probably near Constantinople) where conditions, while hardly luxurious, were at least better than for those working on the railway.[17]

During these brutal years four of the crew of AE2 died. Most of the work activity during 1916 was concerned with the railway, and was centred around the camp at Belemedik. Malnutrition, exhaustion and exposure brought on sickness and disease. Furthermore, once ill, the medical treatment was mainly that obtained from self help among the prisoners, with doubtful assistance from their captors. Chief Stoker C. Varcoe, ON 8275, died of meningitis at Belemedik on 18 September 1916. His widow was living in Devon, England.[18] During one of the plagues of typhus which swept the camp two of the crew of AE2 were carried off, including Petty Officer S.J. Gilbert, RAN, who had joined the RAN on 15 April, 1913, for 5 years service; after some 17 years in the RN. He died on 9 October, 1916.[19] His widow was resident in Australia and she returned to England after the war. The other death from typhus was that of Able Seaman A.E. Knaggs, ON 7893, who died on 22 October 1916, and was buried at Belemedik. His widow was then living in Bristol, England.[20] (The last entry in his Diary is dated 19 July).

Stoker M.W. Williams, ON 2345, was working at Belemedik when he was moved to the hard labour site 5 miles away at Bezardjite.[21] In September, 1916, he was sent to Pozanti to work and was sent to hospital with malaria, together with Private H. Ridgeway of the 15 Lancashire Fusiliers (captured at Achi Baba on 7 August, 1915).

Ridgeway recovered from his delirium and searched for Williams, but his enquiries revealed no trace. Wheat alleges that the Turks were murdering the delirious patients in the hospital in Angora,[22] and Williams' disappearance was certainly mysterious. As enquiries by the Red Cross revealed no further information, the Department of the Navy fixed his date of death at 30 September, 1915. Williams' mother had written several times[23] to the Prime Minister, Mr. W.M. Hughes, concerning the tardy treatment accorded to her pension for this, the fourth, son lost to her in the war (three were lost in action in the Army). Her letters are a tiny glimpse of the hardships she and others had to bear, which, in her case, were not lessened in any way by the dilatory manner in which her right to a pension was treated because the relevant department had difficulty in determining the exact date of death of her son.[24]

At the end of the war the avenue for release of the survivors of AE2 depended largely on their location in Turkey. Some of them made their way to Constantinople, where the Dutch Ambassador commandeered hotel accommodation and they were given their first humane treatment for three and a half years. When the British fleet arrived the submariners were cared for by the submarine depot ship, HMS Adamant (Cdr. Venning), and for five days were the guests of the submarine flotilla. Those in the party with Nichols went by steamer to Mudros, thence on to Malta, and finally London. As they passed through the Sea of Marmora and the Narrows they saw the wreck of E15 still stranded by Kephez Point. Others, such as those with Wheat in Belemedik, went by train down to Smyrna, there to be met in the harbour by the Australian hospital ship Kanowna.[25] The ship took them to Alexandra, thence on to England. Stoker Petty Officer Kinder was able to be sent direct home to Australia.

Lt. Cdr. Stoker and the other two AE2 officers were repatriated back to England. Stoker subsequently turned down command of an RN cruiser, retired from the Royal Navy and went on the stage.[26] Among his roles was that of the "Colonel" in "Journey's End" which role he played throughout a lengthy London season. He died in the late 1960s. Lt. Haggard also later retired (as a Commander) and emigrated to Australia. He became the Aide-de-Camp to the Governor of Victoria and married Miss Marjory Syme and their daughter subsequently married a distinguished RAN officer, Commodore Dacre Smyth (now retired). Cdr. Haggard lived at Woori Yallock, in the Yarra Valley near Warburton, Victoria until his death in a railway level crossing accident in 1939, on the very day he had received his call-up papers from the Navy for the approaching war.

On return to England the submariners went their various ways for recuperation leave. Most of those who were on loan from the RN reverted to that service. Many of the RAN sailors were posted to service with the J boats class submarines and returned to Australia with them in 1919. At least two ratings, Petty Officer Bray and Stoker Jenkins, returned home as part of the crew of the submarine depot ship HMAS Platypus at the same time as the J boats.

ENDNOTES

1. M.W.D. White, The Role of Submarine *A.E. 2* on Anzac Day, RHSQ *Journal* XII, 113-132 (1987).
2. J. Wheat, *Diary of AE2, p.16, Unpublished.*
3. *H.H.G.D. Stoker, Straws in the Wind*, p. 143.
4. J. Wheat, op.cit, p. 21.
5. Holbrook's brother was the second Captain of HMAS Canberra and became Commodore Commanding the Australian Squadron in the period 1930-32. Rear-Admiral G.G.O. Gatacre was his Flag Lt., *Naval Historical Bulletin* Vol. 7, No. 10, June, 1977.
6. J. Wheat, op. cit. p.217.
7. Ibid., p.25.
8. Ibid., p.26.
9. Commonwealth Archives Office, Melbourne (CAO) MP 472 File 5/19/2520. Navy General Correspondence 1910-1921.
10. Sir Julian S. Corbett, *Official History of the Great War. Naval Operations* Vol. 111 p.27.
11. Ibid. p.2
12. For a record of his work see H. Morganthau, *Secrets of the Bosporus.*
13. H.H.G.D. Stoker, op.cit. p. 281.
14. Ibid., p.310 et seq.
15. CAO, MP 472 File 5/18/8646.
16. CAO. General Correspondence 1910-1921. MP 472/1 File 5/19/2520.
17. J. Wheat, op.cit. p. 68.
18. CAO, MP 472 File 5/20/1039.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. J. Wheat, op.cit. p. 38.
22. Ibid., p. 53. P.O. Cecil Bray by letter dated 12 January 1919 reported that his disappearance from hospital was mysterious. CAO Department of Navy — Navy Office Secretariat. General Correspondence 1910/21 MP 472/1 File 5/20/10349.
23. CAO, MP 472/1 File 5/20/ 10349.
24. Brown in his unpublished Diary of AE2 wrote out a list of prisoners who died to his knowledge. Those of the submariners were:
    Able Seaman Barker E15, July 13
    Chief Stoker Charles Varcoe, AE2, September 18 (18 September 1916)
    Petty Officer Gilbert, AE2, September 26 (9 October, 1916)
    E.R.A Coats, H7, October 2
    Stoker Williams, AE2, October 6 (29 September 1916)
    Able Seaman Knaggs, AE2, October 10 (22 October 1916)
    Chief Stoker Taylor, E7, October 15
    C.P.O. Mitchell, E15, November 26.
    (It seems that all dates refer to the year 1916).
    Records in the Submarine Historical Collection. Actual dates of death in brackets.
25. J. Wheat, op.cit. p.67
26. CAO, MP 472 File 5/19/2825.